

The Former Art of the Afghan Kirghiz People Living at Present in Eastern Turkey¹

Jadwiga Pstrusińska

The territory inhabited until 1978 by the Afghan Kirghiz tribe, before their partial exodus due to the Communist coup, is situated in the most eastern part of the so called Wakhan Corridor. The most westerly point of which the Kirghiz people were able to reach during the summer grazing season was the Agh mountain pass in the vicinity of the Ali-su river, to the east of the point where the Afghan, Soviet and Chinese borders converge. In the south their territory in the Wakhan Corridor was delineated by the Afghan-Pakistani border. The place was beautifully shown by Roland and Sabrina Michaud who bravely visited the area in 1967 and subsequently published their pictures². They lived at an altitude of more than 4000 m above sea level in an austere continental mountain climate, where in the winter time, the temperature dropped to – 50 degrees centigrade. The majority of them were shepherds. All of them were Moslems and all considered themselves to be Sunnites belonging to the Hanafi School. They led a semi-nomadic life spending winters and summers elsewhere, the latter usually at more elevated places. They had lost touch with the Kirghiz people on the territory of the Soviet Union more than 80 years before, following the precise delineation of the Soviet-Afghan frontier in this area. Some of them still had in 1974 relatives living in the Soviet Union.

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² R. and S. Michaud, *Caravans to Tartary*, Paris 1985 (first published in London in 1978).

This very hardly accessible territory was situated a dozen or so days' journey away from Kabul, only a part of which could be covered by car. In the summer of 1974 the number of persons belonging to the Afghan Kirghiz tribe was 2568.

... After the Soviets had definitely closed their border in the early thirties, the tribe was cut off its winter pastures and the Qirghiz majority in the Soviet Union, their grazing lands getting confined to Afghan Pamir. The reoccurring Soviet troops' devastating raids on Qirghiz quarters inside Afghan territory in the following years forced the tribe to take refuge in Chinese Turkestan in the late forties. After the communist take over in China they decided, however, to go back to Afghanistan in 1950. In spite of the extremely hard living condition in Pamir, Rahman Qul Khan, through his wise policy and deep concern with his people, was in position to secure their decent existence in the following period. ... Rahman Qul Khan was an outstanding personality and an exceptionally gifted leader. Through his unquestionable authority and sense of responsibility he was able to protect the Pamir Qirghiz community from annihilation and disintegration throughout the most trying historical experiences.³

The data concerning the art of the Afghan Kirghiz people contained in the present paper was gathered during a private 2-person expedition to the Afghan Pamir mountains in the summer of 1974 and has never published by me as a more detailed paper in English thus it is certainly high time to do so and to make it accessible⁴. The expedition was organized by two Polish grantees of the Afghan government who were studying at that time at the University of Kabul, at the Department of Letters and the Humanities. The persons in questions were Bohdan Bielkiewicz and myself. Our route within the Wakhan Corridor was flanked by both parts of the Afghan Pamir, by the so-called Little and Great Pamir.

There were two people that year in the Afghan Pamir among the Kirghiz people who had an interest in the fine arts. They were both sons of the Kirghiz khan Rahman Qul Khan, namely Mohammad Akbar Rahmani

³ *Afghanica. The Afghanistan Studies Newsletter*, vol. 4, no 6/7, March/September 1990, p. 10.

⁴ Partial information has been only orally passed by me at an international session *Kultura i Sztuka Ludów Radzieckich Republik Azji Środkowej*, organized by the Museum of Asia and Pacific, Warsaw, April 1981 and very few of which has been made accessible in print and only in Polish (Bielkiewicz B., *Kirgizi afgańscy*, [in:] Jasiewicz Z. ed., *Kultura i życie społeczne Azji Środkowej. Z polskich badań dawnych i współczesnych*, Uniwersytet im. A. Mickiewicza, *Seria Etnografia*, no. 10, Poznań 1983; Pstrusińska J., *Kirgizi afgańskiego Pamiru*, „Kontynenty” 1976, no. 12).

born in 1950 and Abdul Malek Rahmani, born in 1948. In the summer time, they lived in the Monara region, in the valley of the Chakmaktin lake, at an altitude of 4262 m above sea level. Their authentic creative passion was sufficiently strong for them to continue to sculpt and paint ignoring the local mullah who had threatened them with Judgment Day. It is worth emphasising that they were both self-taught and that their art originated in a place situated far away from any human settlement with its schools, an almost total absence of books and any similar achievements of civilization. They derived their inspiration, above all, from everyday Kirghiz life and the natural sights of the Pamir. They developed their own techniques. It was only sporadically that they patterned their work after an illustration in a book brought from far away for they used to travel to Kabul, rather rarely, in winter time accompanying their father Rahman Qul Khan. In accordance with local knowledge they were the first artists of this type in their ethnic group on Afghan territory.

Mohammad Akbar Rahmani was interested mainly in sculpture. Before that he used to draw a little. He had been sculpting for five years by that time. The majority of his sculptures were done in wood. Yet, wood is hard to come by in the Pamir area and getting it required a few days' journey to the regions situated lower down. The type of wood which was easiest to get was the wood of the dwarf mountain pine, the locally referred to *arcza*. Rahmani also tried to use clay as the raw material for his sculptures. One of such clay sculptures was a small sculpture of the head of Rahman Qul Khan, a dozen or so centimetres long, his father and at the same time the khan of the Afghan Kirghizes. However, Mohammed Akbar Rahmani complained about not knowing the techniques of firing clay which due to the difficulties in getting wood could have been of great use to him. The sculptures done in wood were understandably usually small in size. As a rule they did not exceed half a meter in height. Sometimes he used natural knotted roots as elements of his artistic compositions. He used to leave the wood uncoloured. In this way there emerged human figures, faces, animals and scenes from everyday life. It took him on average 10 to 15 days to complete one sculpture, more rarely, a whole month. His works were, in most cases, realistic in character.

In 1974 Abdul Malek Rahmani had been drawing and painting for about 9 years; he sculpted only sporadically. A good example of his talent as a sculptor are, for instance, the faces of 3 ancient Kirghiz heroes with big helmets on their heads, all of them sculpted in stone. The sculptures were then plastered into the wall of the khan's winter residence. His

paintings were done almost exclusively in water colours or crayons. He usually purchased these during his annual winter expeditions to Kabul which he used to reach together with a group of a dozen or so kinsmen. At a different season of the year such an expedition would have been impossible to them due to the intense heat which was almost unbearable. He also had to travel far to obtain paper, much further than Akbar needed to get his wood. He painted mostly scenes from Kirghiz life, landscapes and portraits. His paintings register all the more important customs and usages of this Afghan ethnic group and thus they may serve as a kind of specific document, a first hand painted report of their everyday matters. In his rather naïve paintings Abdul Malek Rahmani strove to present a realistic vision of the world. He signed most of his paintings, often using the Latin alphabet. All his works had titles.

As regards applied art, an artist who was well known among the Afghan Kirghiz population was Jenn Ali, born in 1912 and who resided in 1974 in the upper part of the Wakhjir Valley. His main interest was making things in metal. The majority of ornamental copper jugs, steel knives, iron pincers for stoking a fire, silver or merely silver plated necklaces, rings, hair pins and other ornaments which one could come across in the yurtas of the entire Afghan Pamir, were made by this man, as well as by his friend and competitor who had died a few years before. Jenn Ali worked very little during those times, completely emaciated by the opium which he had been smoking for several dozen years.

In addition Kirghiz artists also produced richly decorated quilts, cloth tapestry, mats, ropes and tapes, screens, the draperies hung over the entrances to yurtas, which were richly embroidered and adorned with appliqué design, as well as bags, head scarves and other elements of clothing or equipment used in the yurtas. Rugs and tapestries, often exquisitely worked, were the domain of women. One of the techniques which was most frequently used consisted in sewing together tiny bits of colourful material into geometrical patterns, something like patchworks. Every motive had its local designation.

As an activity connected with art, one may also consider cases of the unique preservation of historical monuments, which consisted in renovating ancient engravings on the rock (petroglyphs) which from time immemorial are figures of the Marco Polo chamois, humans and dogs. Thus, for instance, the partly obliterated drawings which can be found a few kilometres away from Monara in the Wakhjir Valley region belonging to the khan, were renovated by deepening the engravings. One could also come

across quite new engravings which had been made by the Kirghiz people relatively recently.

During their winter expeditions to Kabul, Malek and Akbar Rahmani used to take their works with them. In December 1974 their works were even exhibited in a Kabul hall. The organizers exhibited 49 paintings by Abdul Malek, 14 sculptures made by Mohammad Akbar, and a dozen or so tapestries with embroideries and appliqué designs made by women.

I regret to say that this scanty information concerning the art of the former Afghan Kirghiz people is unfortunately the last information gathered on the subject in the field. As far as I am aware no other expedition to these territories was organized afterwards that is before their exodus due to the Soviet invasion. At the present moment some of them still remain in the Wakhan Corridor. The political situation in Afghanistan forced them in the autumn 1978, thus relatively soon after the Communist coup, to flee southward to the territories situated in northern Pakistan. According to their own sources about 1400 left Afghanistan, while about 600-820 remained⁵. Leaving their native land forced them to sell their herds, made them give up the jobs they had been doing for centuries, exchange their splendid national costumes for clothes more suitable to the new hot climate. Their community also became scattered over a large territory as they had to cover long distances in search for work. Thus, also in Pakistan, they no longer constituted the uniform, close-knit ethnic group they had been. The family of Rahman Qul Khan settled in a small Gilgit town, in Gilgit district⁶. Just by chance we had a good luck to meet them there again and talk⁷.

After your visit in 1974, there were sever winter with a big downfall of snow. Eighty per cent of our cattle died then. Afterwards, the herds multiplied again but we had to sell them all. ... I can not say that we come here of our own free will. We were forced by the circumstances. We felt we had to do it. I sacrificed myself, my family, my people so that Taraki could realize his own policy without obstacles. I doubt whether he will be able to appreciate this sacrifice. That is all I can tell you. I should not say anything more. ... I have heard that it is colder in your country than it is here and that there are mountains there. Do you think you could find some room for Kirghiz refugees there? ... You were

⁵ Information given in Gilgit by Rakhman Qul Khan after their exodus from Afghanistan (Pstrusińska J., *A Polish talk with Rahmanqul Khan*, „Afghanica, the Afghanistan Studies Newsletter” 1990, no. 6-7).

⁶ Devastated some years ago by an exceptionally tragic earthquake.

⁷ This conversation with Rahman Qul Khan was published some years later. Bielkiewicz B., Pstrusińska J., *op. cit.*

the last foreigners in Pamir and you saw what life was like in our area. Whereas, radio Moscow and the local broadcasting station in Tashkent hailed me a tyrant. They stated that I oppressed my people, took away their possessions and herds. And you could see with your own eyes that I was khan only by name. My only objective was well-being and peace among this little group of people. How many of them were there? Two thousand five hundred? Two thousand seven hundred? ... In my opinion, I was almost a socialist and in spite of it I was forced to flee ...⁸

The picture was very sad. Like many Afghan Kirgiz they suffered there from many illnesses, due to the change of climate, food, as well as a completely different lifestyle. The two artist brothers Abdul Malek Rahmani and Mohammad Akbar Rahmani were trying to run a shop with materials in Gilgit at the so-called Cashmir Bazaar where they were learning to sell things in the Shina and Urdu languages which during our meeting were still unknown to them. They used only some basic expressions in these languages. Apart from materials they also sold the remnants of yurt equipment, including richly ornamented bags, cloth etc. A few of Malek's paintings, which I had seen in the Afghan Pamir, and at the exhibition in Kabul years before, could now be seen glued to the window of a small shop selling souvenirs for tourists in Gilgit town.

The end of the story is that hundreds of the Afghan Kirgiz have been, in 1983, resettled from Pakistan to eastern Turkey near Lake Van, after an unsuccessful attempt to obtain asylum in the USA⁹ and are at present Turkish citizens, sharing their prospects and experience with their new homeland. According to the Radio Free Afghanistan broadcast of 14 August 1990 Rahman Qul Khan, born in 1919, the leader of this small community for about 50 years, died in Turkey.

In writing this text and making this presentation I wish to thank in this way these brave people for their enormous hospitality and help, almost 33 years ago, and their substantial contribution to my knowledge on Afghanistan. Special thanks go to the already late Orum Bibi, the oldest wife of Abdul Wakil¹⁰, who was kind enough to share her yurt with me for many weeks, who patiently answered all my questions, prepared food and a splendid Kirghiz bed every day and even cured miraculously my twisted leg with her magic and cold water.

⁸ Bielkiewicz B., Pstrusińska J., *op. cit.*

⁹ Preferably Alaska.

¹⁰ The oldest son of Rahamn Qul Khan.